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Phantom Stories: Photographing *Petrochemical America*

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Phantom Stories: Photographing *Petrochemical America*

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Abstract

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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For over forty years, Richard Misrach has been photographing the American landscape, interweaving the politics and poetics of place in the form of striking, large-scale photographs. He is considered a pioneer of color photography, and his work continues to provoke questions about culpability, American identity, and the peculiarities of place, particularly in the American West. Breaking with this geographical trajectory in 1998, Misrach turned his lens to the southeast to explore the relationship between Louisiana's chemical corridor and the rest of the country. This project, *Petrochemical America* (2012), is a collaboration between Misrach and landscape architect and sustainability researcher, Kate Orff. Through a combination of Misrach's photographs and Orff's text and elaborate maps, *Petrochemical America* exposes the complex web of social, political, and environmental histories that have variously impacted the construction of place, home, and culture in an area that has come to be known as Cancer Alley. Misrach and Orff argue that Cancer Alley is not a localized phenomenon, but rather is indicative of the ideological landscape of the entire country.

Through their compendium of surreal images of homes dwarfed by chemical plants, pipelines cutting through swamps, and preserved slave quarters, Misrach and Orff create an otherworldly environment, a place that is wholly American. The authors draw explicit links—through both image and text—between Louisiana's past as a slave state and its present as the largest crude oil producer in the nation. Through narratives of production, consumption, displacement, and health, the present Cancer Alley—and indeed the nation—emerge as reiterations of history. While *Petrochemical America* has been exhibited around the country, published in a book which is now in its second edition, and received critical praise, it has yet to be studied within the three histories that frame the project—race, capitalism, and the environment. Through a close reading of *Petrochemical America* in both its exhibition and photobook form, this essay seeks to explore how the project points to a new paradigm of the American landscape—a landscape that is haunted by its slaveholding past.

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Visualize your childhood playground. In that playground, picture yourself in elementary school playing basketball with your classmates. Now, imagine the smell of rotten eggs and natural gas. You may have heard the phrase, "Smells like money," but to you this just smells like home. Imagine that towering outside the chain link fence of the playground is a refinery with oil holding tanks, metal buildings, and a giant, burning flare stack. The fumes from the flare stack make the air so thick that the sky is opaque, and an invisible, toxic cloud surrounds you wherever you go. Occasionally, during recess you hear men's voices in megaphones instructing you to go inside. This does not feel strange to you; you've never known anything but this air, this industry, and this routine. Richard Misrach makes this scene much easier to visualize in his photograph, *Playground and Shell Refinery, Norco, Louisiana* (1998) [figure 1]. This haunting image of childhood confronted by industry is part of a series of photographs Misrach made of the industrial corridor which lines a portion of the Mississippi River in Louisiana, known to many as Cancer Alley.

There are many layers of history in this one photograph and many truths that cannot be seen upon first glance. The caption accompanying this image informs viewers that the basketball court was once on an all-black elementary school campus, but after 1968 "on the eve of the school's integration through federally court-ordered busing of the area's white children" the school was burned to the ground and the basketball court is all that remains—a symbol of the school's destruction (Misrach and Orff 2012: 76). The town itself, originally called Sellers, was bought out by Shell Oil in 1934 and renamed

Norco, an acronym for New Orleans Refining Company. Sellers (and later Norco) has historically been segregated; white residents live on the north side of town, farthest away from the River Road in traditional suburban neighborhoods, and the black residents live in a neighborhood called Diamond, named after the Diamond Plantation on which it sits. The neighborhood has received national attention over the past thirty years as the Diamond community has continued to protest the destruction of their homes, their history, and their health, effectively echoing the community's historic battles for basic civil rights nearly sixty years ago. Steve Lerner has devoted a book to Diamond's struggle and points out, "Some Diamond residents traced their history on the land back to plantation days. Their story started during the days of slavery, when many of their ancestors worked the sugarcane fields of the Trepagnier Plantation that subsequently became the Diamond Plantation, Belltown, and finally the Diamond subdivision of Norco" (Lerner 2005: 11). Particularly on the white side of Norco, many are quick to point out that the industry has brought immense wealth to the region, but Lerner and other sources reveal where the wealth is distributed: to the white residents. Slawomir Grunberg's documentary, *Fenceline: A Company Town Divided* (2002), also emphasizes this point. According to Wilma Subra, a local chemist and environmental consultant, "The people of the Diamond community have about a fifty percent rate of finishing high school...and they desperately want to be relocated. Only one individual works at the industrial facilities...The rest of Norco is ninety-eight percent white, and these people work at the refineries" (Grunberg 2002). By 2002, as the text that accompanies this photograph explains, Shell relocated most of its residents due to years of complaints, but

this relocation program, called the "'Norco Voluntary Fenceline Property Purchase Program," excluded half the community and offered only to pay "fair market value" for residents' homes, a cruel insult from the multi-billion-dollar company. Shell's presence in the Diamond neighborhood has unquestionably lowered the value of residents' homes and it has also paved over their history (Rolfes 2000).

While this photograph contains histories of a specific place in the American South, it also represents the history of the entire nation. It is a difficult and unnerving place to call to mind for many Americans who did not grow up in a refining town. These places are not often depicted, and the toxicity of the air, still, is difficult to represent, even with a camera. Triangulated within this image, and indeed within the place of Norco, Louisiana, are the overlapping histories of capitalism, racism, and environmental pollution, all of which are enabled by America's paradoxical dependence on cheap oil, a resource well-known to be unsustainable. With this photograph Misrach asks the viewer to consider the history of this refining town as the legacy of American capitalism, not just as the legacy of Shell Oil. The image is framed explicitly so the playground symbolically opposes the refinery as if in a standoff, visually asking, Who is valuable here, the children or the corporation? Who is recognized as a full citizen? These questions are not just asked of Norco, but of a capitalist country that has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the ethics of big industry.

Playground and Shell Refinery, Norco, Louisiana is part of a larger collaborative exhibition and photobook by Misrach, a landscape photographer, and Kate Orff, a landscape architect and sustainability researcher. This project, *Petrochemical America*

(2012) is a compendium of surreal images shot in the documentary mode of homes dwarfed by chemical plants, pipelines cutting through swamps, and preserved slave quarters that together create an otherworldly environment, but as the title suggests, is wholly American. The photograph of the basketball court and its caption are crucial to Misrach and Orff's project since it links the past struggles for racial equality to the present struggles for environmental justice through a single site. It is important, once again, to reiterate the history of this playground. During the Civil Rights movement the playground was part of all-black elementary school, and before that, an African American freedmen's town; before that, it was a plantation worked by poor black laborers, and first, a plantation worked by slaves. This photograph and Orff's text tether the history of industry in the area to the social history of the town as it reveals how various forms of black labor and poverty have been rearticulated in each historical moment.

Throughout *Petrochemical America* Misrach's photographs embalm the unusual geography of the alluvial floodplains, but what is at stake in these southern landscapes is the country's perpetuation of yet another peculiar institution: Big Oil. While Misrach and Orff's project has been exhibited around the country (though not in the Gulf Coast region),[1] has been published in a book which is now in its second edition, and has received praise from publications like *The New Yorker*, it has still not been critically considered within the three histories that frame the project—race, capitalism, and the environment. Through a close reading of *Petrochemical America* in both its exhibition

[1] This will be considered further in the conclusion.

and book form, this essay seeks to re-map the uneasy continuities Misrach and Orff draw between the slaveholding South and contemporary Petrochemical America.

Petrochemical America and Cancer Alley

For over forty years, Richard Misrach has been photographing the American landscape, interweaving the politics and poetics of place in the form of striking, large-scale photographs. He is considered a pioneer of color photography, and his work has long-provoked questions about culpability, American identity, and the peculiarities of place, particularly in the American West.[2] Louisiana's chemical corridor is an unusual landscape for the photographer to depict. Aside from this project, Misrach's photographic gaze has been largely focused westward on the deserts of the American Southwest, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, and in his current project, the border between Mexico and the U.S.[3] These Western views earned him comparisons to nineteenth-century landscape photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins. *Petrochemical America*, instead, turns eastward to Louisiana's Cancer Alley to consider the implications of the oil industry on constructions of home, health, and history. This one hundred and fifty mile stretch of the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New

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[2] Anne Wilkes Tucker, "A Problem of Beauty" in *Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach* (New York: Bullfinch Press in association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1998); Max Kozloff, "Ghastly News from Epic Landscapes" in *American Art* (Winter/Spring 1991) 108-31; Artist biography, Fraenkel Gallery Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

[3] Though the photographer has photographed the region regularly throughout his career, and has published another photobook on the region, *Destroy This Memory* (2010) about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, he is most recognized for his work in the American West and Southwest.

Orleans, traveled by way of the River Road, is home to over a quarter of the country's petrochemical companies as well as alarmingly high rates of cancer. Misrach began photographing the region in 1998 as part of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta's ongoing "Picturing the South" series. But after some time in the region, the photographer became sick from what he believes were the toxic fumes in the air and as a result, turned in only ten photographs and a contact sheet. These photographs were exhibited under the name *Cancer Alley* in the High Museum's adjunct gallery in Atlanta from April 2000 to May, 2001.

Roughly ten years later, in 2009, the High Museum asked him to revisit the project. He returned to the region with Orff in order to document what, if anything, had changed. *Petrochemical America* is the result of their collaboration, consisting of both a traveling exhibition and a photobook. Both contain images made from Misrach's 1998 and 2009 trips alongside Orff's "Ecological Atlas," which beautifully maps and illustrates data her team collected related to pollution, consumption, and displacement within the region. Misrach's photographs depict a place in which antebellum plantation homes, chemical plants, and struggling, marginalized communities coexist in a place still haunted by the racism of the Bourbon political rule. Meanwhile, Orff's atlas demonstrates the nation's historic dependence on this area and the environmental, economic, and social impact of petrochemical power in a manner she has called a "past-present-future...time-scape" (Harris 2012). Indeed, this insistence on time as a continuum allows Misrach and Orff to reveal not only what the present condition of Cancer Alley looks like, but how it came to be and how it positions us for the future.

Photography and Louisiana

Misrach is not the first to visualize concern for Louisiana. This region has a rich history of photographers coming to the state in order to portray its struggles for the world to see. During the Great Depression, for example, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) sent photographers like Russell Lee to Louisiana to depict the faces of American rural poverty. The FSA photographs provide a historical backdrop for Misrach's contemporary images as many of the towns that the FSA photographers documented lie along present-day Cancer Alley. One photograph by Russell Lee from 1938 depicts a young girl forlornly resting on the stairs of her home, "the old Trepagnier house" near Norco [figure 2]. This is the former "big house" of the then-abandoned Trepagnier Plantation. This little girl lives here with many families struggling to survive in the collapsed labor market after the widespread adoption of machine labor.[4] The Trepagnier Plantation later became the Diamond Plantation, upon which Misrach's playground sits. Her home represents the effects of debt peonage in which white landowners charged exorbitant interest on commissary goods, binding the cheap, black laborer to the farm until more efficient tractors could replace her physical labor—in effect, leaving her both jobless and homeless (Daniel 1990). In Lee's photograph, a child wearily accepts her

[4] Orff notes this history in her portion of the text. "Although emancipation changed land owner/laborer relations and many blacks were able to own the land they worked, production methods changed little until cheap internal combustion engine harvesters hit the market in the 1920s. By 1940, mechanical harvesting machines began to displace laborers. As many as fifty or more cane cutters could be replaced by a single machine, forcing thousands of former (albeit low) wage earners into poverty" (Misrach and Orff 2012: 181).

impoverished fate in the age of mechanical production; and in Misrach's photograph, viewers are presented with a landscape in which children confront the value of their health in a capitalist structure. In both photographs, black residents of Norco have little worth in the eyes of the state.

Lee's photograph sets the stage for the long battle for environmental and racial justice in the Diamond community—and across America—at the end of the twentieth century. Another photograph by Lee shows a "row of negro cabins" in Destrehan, Louisiana from 1938 [figure 3]. These cabins remarkably resemble the restored slave cabins that Misrach photographed in 1998 in Edgard, Louisiana, just twenty miles up the Mississippi River [figure 4]. Like the people who once resided in Misrach's slave cabins, the inhabitants of Lee's one-room homes are descendents of slaves. The familiar structures mark not only their physical place in the plantation, but also their social place in the historical imaginary of the region. The black side of town, even in the 1930s, was marked by slave shacks.

The Documerica project, which ran from 1971-1977 was another government-sponsored photography project that, like the FSA, depicted the dire state of the region. Project Documerica, which was a project of the newly-established Environmental Protection Agency, specifically sought to change the way Americans viewed the landscape—culturally and environmentally. Also like the FSA, Documerica sent photographers around the country, but some of the most reproduced images came from the Gulf Coast region from the photographers Marc St. Gil and John Messina. Messina's 1972 photograph of a Baton Rouge oil refinery nearly hidden under a mountain of rusted

oil drums highlights, as Misrach's basketball court does, the total disregard of corporations towards their host communities [figure 5]. Unlike Misrach's photograph, this image does not attempt to link corporate production to racial inequity. Similarly, while the FSA photographs, like Lee's, expressed a belief that social inequality and the landscape were inextricably linked, the EPA skirted the issue of race.[5] In an article published in 1971 William D. Ruckelshaus, the first administrator of the EPA wrote, "Other issues—like poverty and race, and even the war—do not so directly touch us all, but the environment has each of us and all of us as a constituency" (Ruckelshaus 1971: 15). Race and the environment occupied different ideological landscapes in the 1970s, and the two issues were frequently seen to be unrelated. Misrach's work intervenes in these photographic histories, and explicitly visualizes Petrochemical America as a landscape where race, capitalism, and the environment converge in shockingly undeniable ways.

At the same time, and perhaps more significantly, Misrach's work also converses with two other visual contexts: the history of American landscape photography and the Depression-era activist photobook. Like the Documerica project, Misrach's photographs of Cancer Alley depict an explicit concern with the environmental degradation of the Louisiana landscape. However, unlike Documerica they also outline—through both image and text—the social and economic frameworks that underlie the histories that

[5] Cara Finnegan notes, "Particularly in early pictures, the Historical Section [of the FSA photographs] sought to emphasize the relationship between tenancy and migrant labor by relating both issues to the condition of the land. In his letters to photographers in the field, Stryker repeatedly asked them to make pictures that related people to the land and vice versa" (Finnegan 2003: 43).

came before oil, and specifically the history of slavery in Louisiana. By positioning Misrach's work within the history of American landscape photography and the Depression-era photobook, I will argue that *Petrochemical America* points to a new paradigm of the American landscape, a landscape that is socially, economically, and environmentally haunted by its slaveholding past. These overlapping contexts reveal the activist intentions of Misrach's photographs and tether his claims about the Louisiana landscape to the rest of the nation.

Topographic Views

> Still, no part of the American historical imagination is so shaped by visual imagery as its image of the nineteenth-century West. Photography's role here is central, for photographers truly bore witness to the epic story of the American settlement of the western half of the continent.
>
> —Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*

Photography and the American West drove each other ever-further in the nineteenth-century. Aesthetically, the young medium modeled itself around the principles of painting, and early American landscape photographers like William Henry Jackson and Timothy O'Sullivan mirrored the expansive, spiritual views of the Late Romantic painters, prompting the viewer to imagine themselves within the picture's frame. After the Civil War, photographers commissioned by government and private industry worked closely with scientists to survey, map, and depict the geological features of the West. These photographed landscapes were offered as the country's unique connection to its primordial past, the natural antiquity that stood in for the absence of the ancient art of

their European forebears. Representations of the West were circulated across the country as evidence of both a communal American heritage and the natural fortune the nation offered its citizens (Sandweiss 2002). While these photographs depicted a literal place—the American West—they also stood in for the values of the nation as a whole, a place of rugged individualism, capitalism, and freedom.

In the mid-to late-nineteenth century, the perception of the camera's unique ability to capture the "truth" allowed the role of photographer to supersede the painter in the depiction of the landscape. At the same time, the new technology borrowed many aesthetic conventions established by landscape painting like broad, expansive views with little or no figures in the landscape. As Barbara Novak explains, these formal elements transformed the act of viewing the landscape into an active, spiritual exercise in which the viewer imagines herself within the scene as an axis mundi to the heavens (Novak 1980).[6] Novak writes, "Rarely a major protagonist in the American landscape, the figure is more often engulfed in space, and sometimes absent...The turned back—a major nineteenth-century motif—can...act as a surrogate inviting the spectator into the picture." (Novak 1980: 158). In this manner, the photograph allowed the far reaches of the West to

[6] Though Novak's text is primarily about nineteenth-century painting, it emphasizes the importance of painting to the aesthetics and function of early American landscape photography. Peter Bacon Hales' essay "American Views and the Romance of Modernization" in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* also discusses the young medium's early reliance on painting. In particular, Hales details Carleton Watkins' incorporation of "painterly and literary landscape ideals and traditions into the making of photographs" (Hales 1991: 212). Novak is used here specifically because she delves further into the symbolism of the landscape, and important for Misrach's work, the function of the figure in the landscape.

become part of the American consciousness, a landscape in which viewers projected themselves, communed with god, and saw their individual role in Manifest Destiny.

Survey photographs commissioned by the United States Geological Survey like Timothy O'Sullivan's *Iceberg Cañon, Nevada* (1871) [figure 6], as well as other public photographs drove westward expansion as they depicted the American West as a virgin land to be conquered and "civilized," fueling Indian wars, homesteading, and industry growth (Sandweiss 2002). These photographic landscapes were a symbol of opportunity and independence for individuals and industry alike. In 1893, Katherine Bates echoed this sentiment in the patriotic poem that would become the song, "America the Beautiful" in which "amber waves of grain" and "purple mountain majesties" were graced by God, a land where "pilgrim feet" could seek freedom. That same year, Frederick Jackson Turner famously pronounced the closing of the frontier, and landscape photography began to take a preservationist turn.

In the 1920s and 1930s photographers like Ansel Adams began poetically depicting the landscape, aiding environmental groups like the Sierra Club in efforts to establish national and state parks. Fifty years later, these majestic landscapes set the precedent from which the New Topographics movement, inaugurated by the 1975 George Eastman House exhibition, reframed America's relationship with nature to one of contemplative concern with the "man-altered landscape" (*New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape* 1975). Though not part of that landmark exhibition, Misrach is often associated with this critical turn in landscape photography, and his work comes to embody what Max Kozloff terms the "postpastoral" (Kozloff

1997: 193). While New Topographic photographers like Robert Adams and Joe Deal depicted the landscapes of post World War II suburban sprawl and industrialization, Misrach turned to political landscapes. In his longest running project, *Desert Cantos*, he depicts what he calls the "collision between civilization and nature" in the deserts of the American Southwest (Harris 1992: 83).

Misrach's photographic practice illustrates a definitive shift in the perception of the American landscape wherein the viewer encounters a scene so transformed by human intervention that nature and culture become indistinguishable products of one another. Unlike the allegorical scenes of the nineteenth century, Misrach does not offer viewers a poetic representation of the cycle of life, death, and rejuvenation; his surreal landscapes instead argue that the nature of existence itself has been irrevocably transformed. Through *Petrochemical America*, viewers are confronted with the Anthropocene, the epoch when our desire for culture has led, perhaps, to the end of all things once deemed "natural." In this landscape nature has mutated from a symbol of god to a symbol of the evils of man. The once boundless wilderness of opportunity has become a place inhospitable to nature itself.

Contemplating Nature

Many of the formal choices Misrach makes pictorially function in the same way as nineteenth-century representations of the American West. Misrach's intentional lack of humans in *Petrochemical America* emphasizes, as it did over a century ago, the viewer's relationship with the landscape by positioning her as a witness. While Misrach could

have depicted the human plight of the residents, this would have transformed his project into a social documentary about the very specific problems of Louisiana's Cancer Alley. Instead, Misrach allows the unique particularities of this place—and in particular the confluence of race, capitalism, and the environment—to implicate the country as a whole. The trope of the human in the landscape gets to the heart of some of the criticism *Petrochemical America* has received—especially Gwen Ottinger's argument that Misrach's photographs do not adequately portray the "human dimensions" of Cancer Alley's toxic landscapes (Ottinger 2013). Ottinger suggests that Misrach should have included photographs of "residents using their inhalers" or "community members demonstrating at refinery gates or taking air samples under a raging flare" (Ottinger 2013). The inclusion of such portraits would displace the viewer from the landscape, making this a narrative about the residents of the industrial corridor and not our own—shared—national story. In *Petrochemical America* we are all complicit in the landscape and we are ourselves implied within the frame. While the book form of the project includes four images of people, the traveling exhibition, which began at Aperture in 2012, includes only *Night Fishing, Near Bonnet Carré Spillway, Norco, Louisiana*, (1998) [figure 7]. This photograph visually functions much like *Iceberg Cañon, Nevada* from 1871 [figure 6]; however, the representational forms take on new meaning.

O'Sullivan's photograph of Iceberg Canyon is a broad shot of the steep, rocky cliffs that tower over the Colorado River as it cuts through the border between Arizona and Nevada. The pale gray of the water reveals the silhouette of a man sitting on the shore as he looks out over the sweeping landscape. The figure's dark profile echoes the

jagged rocks on which he sits and formally, he becomes one with the landscape. The viewer cannot make out his facial expression or the exact direction of his gaze; he is not finally, what this image is about. At the same time, his crisp outline signals that he is deliberately placed and made to hold his hunched body perfectly still while the long exposure captures his likeness. Practically, he gives the landscape scale, but metaphorically he stands in for the viewer, who themselves are made to feel small against the geological expanse of the canyon. His seated body, rooted in the darkness of the foreground, counters the opening of the pale, cloudless sky, and the landscape becomes a heaven-sent tabula rasa on which man could make his impression. For the nineteenth-century viewer, images like this frequently served as a symbol of the unbounded possibilities of the American landscape and its potential for limitless expansion.

Misrach's photograph of the night fisherman uses a similar representational motif. A dark figure stands with his back turned to the camera at the bottom of the bank of the Mississippi after the sun has set. Across the river, the lights of the refineries cast reflections on the water as a large barge makes its way across the picture plane, diminishing the fisherman in its wake. The blur of the barge divides the image between the movement of industry and the stasis of the figure in the landscape, perhaps a false dichotomy since he too is a function of industry because of his inability to survive without it. Again, nature and culture visually meld together in a surreal perversion of the pastoral. The bank of the river might have once exemplified the persistence of nature, while the barge and the refinery-lit sky could have symbolized the unstable essence of industry. Yet, even the Mississippi itself has been reshaped and harnessed to carry the

industry's waste products out into the Gulf of Mexico. What viewers cannot see is what is in the water and the air, the invisible toxic particles that make their way into the life of the river as well as the fisherman's body, even if the fish is thrown back. The figure becomes a sacrificial product of the petrochemical South and viewers, positioned as spectators in the frame, are confronted with the ubiquity of industry and the futility of self-sustenance.

While the fisherman can stand in for the viewer, inviting her into the frame, he can also can push her out. Unlike O'Sullivan's canyon, which compels the viewer to bask in the tranquility and magnificence of nature, Misrach's spillway is likely not a place the viewer wants to be. In one, the spectator is delighted to imagine herself; and the other, thankful she is not actually there. While the figure maintains its status as a surrogate for the viewer, its function has shifted from a body on which the viewer projects her own desires to a body on which the viewer projects her fears. At the same time, instead of shocking the viewer with an image of outright horror, Misrach's subtle, highly aestheticized rendering of the spillway allows a prolonged engagement with the image and asks viewers to look closely and not to turn away. This is *our* America, not a distant, backwards place. Only, the one who succeeds in this landscape is not the rugged individual, but the corporation. The frontier ethos—the belief in infinite resources and prosperity—is at play in both of these images, though it too has transformed from a geographical concept to an environmental one. Like O'Sullivan's *Iceberg Cañon, Nevada*, Misrach's *Night Fishing, Near Bonnet Carré Spillway, Norco, Louisiana* depends on a belief in infinity. While the frontier of O'Sullivan's photograph conveys

America's ability to expand "from sea to shining sea" and the abundance of opportunities for its citizens, Misrach's captures the contemporary belief in the expanse of industry and a limitless supply of natural resources—namely oil—from which to enable production and consumption in perpetuity.

Unlike a social documentary narrative that might focus more specifically on the literal human plight of the residents, Misrach's images make a much broader statement by illustrating a new paradigm of our relationship with the American landscape.[7] No longer the pilgrim in the wilderness carving out a place in nature, we have become victims of our own culture—and specifically of a belief in infinite consumption—and not just in an environmental sense. This disaster is much more than a tragedy of the landscape; it is a tragedy of the American political and economic system, which has privileged a largely white, corporate citizen over a largely non-white, working—even enslaved—class. Misrach's lifelong work asks, Who belongs in which landscape? What histories are passed on or paved over? And, importantly, what are we going to do about it? Such questions pervade *Petrochemical America* and if asked, lead viewers directly to the histories of slavery that have shaped the contemporary industrial landscape of the River Road and continue to impact the environment as well as the people who call Cancer Alley home. While most of Misrach's landscapes, like *Playground and Shell Refinery, Norco, Louisiana* are devoid of people, the petrochemical infrastructure becomes a stand-in for the impact of man-made destruction while it also aesthetically

[7] While I acknowledge that not everyone in America is complicit in destroying the landscape, I am writing about "we" as the collective culture that one inherits—even if one rejects it—as an American. This is our national character.

parallels the huge rocks and cliffs that dominated nineteenth-century landscape photography. Instead of communicating the transcendental concept of geologic time, these refineries, oil holding tanks, and pipelines become a metaphor for the unbreakable power that corporations hold over the region as well as the unyielding national demand for large-scale production.

Misrach asserts the influence of the petrochemical landscape on the present construction of American identity by formally echoing nineteenth-century landscape photography, which as Sandweiss explains has had an unparalleled influence on shaping the "American historical imagination" since the dawn of medium (Sandweiss 2002: 13). Misrach's postpastoral landscapes thus represent a present iteration of national identity, not just as a paradigm shift of our relationship with the landscape, but as the product of the nineteenth-century frontier imaginary.

Norco Cumulus Cloud (1998) [figure 8] in Norco, Louisiana exemplifies this concept as it unites the atrocity of environmental pollution with the prosaic qualities of a nineteenth-century cloud study. In this photograph, a large, narrow field bordered on both sides by trees frames a tiny Shell oil refinery with a burning flare stack at the central vanishing point. A large, puffy white cumulus cloud dominates the picture, recalling a nineteenth-century pastoral scene. It is only upon reading the caption that the viewer is aware that the cloud is named the Norco Cumulus Cloud because it never goes away. While it looks like a natural cloud, it is a by-product of the burning flare stack, which is

only supposed to release gas in the unplanned event of over-pressure within the plant[8]. Yet, this flare stacks burns consistently enough to produce its own permanent, eponymous cloud. The very notion of this cloud as a quotidian occurrence suggests the almost imperceptible ways that petrochemical pollution is present in the daily lives of Norco residents. The fact that this mass of toxic fumes mimics a natural form is even more frightening because it allows it to go relatively unnoticed since it appears to be part of the natural landscape. By aestheticizing disconcerting views, Misrach overturns the nineteenth-century American tradition of visualizing the landscape in which the viewer imagines themselves in a land of opportunity. At the same time, Misrach uses nineteenth-century conventions to elevate the status of the image to an object of contemplation rather than one of horror, asking the viewer to patiently and actively look at the scene instead of turning away from it.

This approach is also apparent in *Swamp and Pipeline, Geismar, Louisiana* (1998) [figure 9] in which a chalky green swamp is cut through by a rusty industrial pipe. Behind the pipe, the brown, leafless cypress trees that would once be green and dapple the sunlight along the water juxtapose the greenness of the swamp and shoot up like skeletons in an apocalyptic landscape. The caption discusses the erosion of pastures and marshlands by networks of pipelines that transport oil throughout the region; and in

[8] The International Association of Oil and Gas Producers (OGP) notes in a report published in 2000 that "Venting is the controlled release of unburned gases directly into the atmosphere. The availability of a flare or a vent ensures that associated natural gas can be safely disposed of in emergency and shutdown situations. Where gas cannot be stored or used commercially, the risk of fire and explosion must be reduced by either flaring or venting" (OGP 2000: ii).

Orff's *Requiem for a Bayou* (2012) [figure 10], the viewer learns about the loss of foliage for the cypress trees that once formed a sheltering canopy over the marsh. The web of wildlife has been replaced with a grid of pipelines. Like many of the landscapes that appear throughout the exhibition, this image interrupts the visual lexicon of the pastoral and the sublime with images of human ruin, at once seducing viewers with vibrant colors and evocative light and confronting them with scenes of destruction. At the same time, more benign images, like *Norco Cumuls Cloud*, lure in viewers with a traditionally rendered, seemingly untroubled pastoral scene that is then interrupted by the trail of pollution emanating from the refinery beneath the perfectly centered cloud. A similar, sinister truth underlines every photograph in *Petrochemical America*.

The large-scale display of Misrach's photos further implicates the viewer in the landscapes. As the exhibition view from Aperture's gallery in the fall of 2012 indicates, eleven massive, unframed photographs are mounted on boards and are either propped against the wall or are placed on a small railing about two feet off the ground [figure 11]. They do not proclaim their fine art status through mattings and frames. Instead, the viewer is transported beyond the white walls of the gallery and into a reconstruction of Cancer Alley. The material aspects of the photographs—the paper, the ink, the frame created by the lens—dissipate and the exhibition space becomes a comment on place itself, allowing Cancer Alley to also transcend its geographical coordinates and to become a rhetorical trope—a synecdoche—for America at large. Walking through the exhibition space, the viewer encounters these landscapes more or less at human scale, reinforcing the psychological framework that positions the viewer as a part of the

landscape. Misrach said as much in 2013 at the David Brower exhibition of the work in Berkeley, California, noting that the viewer should feel "contained by the image" (Burke 2013). Many of Orff's maps are printed at a similar scale as Misrach's photographs and are dispersed throughout the space; thus they interact directly with the photographs and the captions on the wall. In the center of the space is a table with four chairs and four copies of *Petrochemical America*, inviting viewers to study the project closer by reading Orff's essays or exploring how the photographs interact with one another in the book form. This is a key aspect of the exhibition because it creates a very specific viewing context in which the photographs are considered in relation to the wall text and maps—Orff's "throughlines"—instead of as isolated illustrations.[9] While Orff's text and maps add an interdisciplinary, research-based element to Misrach's images, the photographs on their own transform the exhibition space into a surreal environment of abandonment, decay, and loss. By positioning the viewer within the frame, Misrach asks her to also bear witness to these landscapes and their economic, social, and environmental implications.

"Phantom Stories"

While the exhibition of *Petrochemical America* presents Orff's maps alongside Misrach's photographs, the book is divided into two parts. Misrach's images make up part one, titled "Cancer Alley" and Orff's maps, diagrams, and text make up the second

[9] This is a term Orff uses to describe "the idea of tracing the line of a story through many different moments, and moving from almost an intuitive reading through a deep research process based on interviews, newspaper searches, and library work" (Harris 2012).

part of the book, the "Ecological Atlas" which "unpacks" the layers of Misrach's images. Orff explains,

> The idea of unpacking really came from Richard's narrative-rich photographs, where I could see phantom stories within every image...I wanted to know more in terms of understanding the complex web of industrial and ecological and human stories that may have given shape to that image...the kind of depth that you can go into relative to the past formation and future of that place—one photograph can touch so many different issues and situations. (Harris 2012)

While the phantom stories that Orff draws out in her portion of the text are not immediately discernable in every image, they are visually alluded to through symbolism and sequencing. Simply put, there is more to Misrach's images than just what meets the eye; his photographs cannot be read literally as documents but, as Orff explains, must be "unpacked" like poems.

This insistence on the presentness of the past in Misrach's photographs brings up the concept of haunting. Avery Gordon describes haunting as "endings that are not over" but instead remain in the "social geography of where peoples reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity, prolonging as it always has, a something to be done" (Gordon 1997: 139). Misrach reveals how the memory of Louisiana's slaveholding past is embodied in the division of neighborhoods, in the location of industry, and in the obscuring of specific histories. Thus, Misrach's photographs are haunted by histories of displacement, racism, and social stratification.

Fittingly, "Cancer Alley" opens on a spectral note with a photograph of an unnamed, gray-haired tour guide. She is dressed as a plantation mistress in a white blouse

and blood red hoop skirt with a matching collar and stands under the towering porch of a plantation home complete with neoclassical columns [figure 12]. She squarely faces the camera with a defensive, rigid pose, and looks sternly into the lens as she holds a modern cordless phone in her right hand. To the left of the frame, green trees peek through the massive white columns, but behind her, the contrast is heavily blown out, nearly creating a black and white backdrop. She appears to have moved slightly during the exposure creating a translucent, ghost-like form around her contours. Misrach portrays the plantation tour guide as the confluence of past and present, Old South and New South, memory and reality. The accompanying caption explains that despite the Great Recession, tourist sites like the Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, grossed over 965-million dollars in 2009 alone (Misrach and Orff 2012: 20). "Cultural institutions" like the Oak Alley plantation proudly stake their claim to a privileged white history as a way to not only link their heritage to a long lost affluent lifestyle, but also to reify and articulate their participation within a contemporary racial caste system.[10] This photograph sets the tone for the rest of the book as it suggests the long history of exploitation on these landscapes as well as the public's participation in perpetuating problematic versions of history and exploiting these areas for entertainment and financial gain. As the first image of the book, the plantation tour guide becomes like Dante's Virgil, the guide who will lead the reader through *Petrochemical America*, beginning, of course, with its slave-

[10] See Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (2007).

holding past. Only, as the reader will see, there is no ultimate ascension from hell to heaven—or even purgatory.

The book continues, presenting scenes inside various plantation homes, the restored slave cabin from Edgard, Louisiana [figure 7], and an African American jogger running away from the camera accompanied by the story of the country's largest slave revolt. These images make explicit references to slavery; they also allude to the production and consumption patterns of the Cotton South that laid the foundation for the contemporary Petrochemical South. Orff writes of the Louisiana landscape, "Over one hundred oil refineries and chemical manufacturing facilities are intermixed with sugar refineries, metal processors, and coffee production facilities, revealing the demands of the nation's past and present" (Misrach and Orff 2012: 129). While the labor and the products of labor have changed, the economy is still built on the premise of producing large quantities of goods that are exported out of the region. "Despite progressive 'good neighbor' policies and earnest beautification efforts, these corporations primarily enrich distant shareholders. In providing raw materials to people far away, they mirror the export economy of cotton and cane in a rather obvious historical parallel" (Misrach and Orff 2012: 157). At the same time, as one of the country's largest exporters of oil products, Louisiana should be, as it was before the Civil War, one of the wealthiest states in the U.S. Yet, nearly twenty percent of Louisiana's population lives below the poverty level (US Census Bureau 2014).

Next, Misrach portrays the nostalgic memorabilia of rural life: religious statuary, churches, and roadside kitsch which all act as a testament to the region's enduring way of

life—even while the imposing modernity of industrial architecture lurks along the horizon lines. People still sell homegrown vegetables, fresh seafood, and barbeque from the side of the road. That said, subsistence farming and fishing is one of the most endangered economies in the region. This portion of the text is followed by a series of landscapes that illustrate this point. *Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana* (1998) [figure 13] in particular has become a widely circulated image by way of the HBO television series, *True Detective* (2014). This photograph, among several others from *Petrochemical America* appears in the title sequence of the television crime drama and are used as inspiration for the surreal setting of the show.

In the sugar cane, the past makes itself known among the present industrial scenery. The right and left sides of the frame are flanked by sugar cane and a well-worn path leads the eye to the horizon, which is lined with machinery enshrouded in a thick haze originating from a flare stack on the left side of the frame. Two forms of industry exist side-by-side, each representing the nation's historic dependence on the area for crops like cotton and sugar cane—and now, petrochemicals. Orff explains, "We started to think about this very simple photograph [*Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana*] in many different dimensions—going back in time and understanding that this was a former indigo plantation that then became sugarcane, and although it was empty today was once teeming with slave labor and then with plantation workers" (Harris, 2012). These cycles of labor, she says are "latent in each photo" and while they transform in each iteration, they remain essentially rooted in a capitalist ethos

that aims to get so much dollar value out of piece of land, a piece of machinery, or a body without regard for its welfare.

The landscape's current absence of laborers also speaks to its many eras of production, from slave labor to tenant farming to the mechanized labor that eliminated the need for human labor altogether. The towering verticality of the refinery mirrors the upward growth of the cane, as if they both are organic products of the earth. Or conversely, that both are products of industry, alluding to the corporatization of agriculture where not only is human labor deposed by mechanical labor, but industrial products made from the refining of natural gas—pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers—are actually used in the growing processes. Again, Misrach transports us into the Anthropocene where what at first appears to be natural—plants to be used for food—are themselves chemically modified and engineered. Perhaps the most frightening revelation of this photograph is that these corporate agricultural products, like the sugar cane, will be consumed by people, capturing the most private and inner components of human life—our viscera—in its imperial embrace, no matter where in America you live.

Home/Sick

The last group of images made in 1998 elaborate on the themes of home, displacement, and environmental racism. Unlike the plantation homes-come-tourist sites that open the book, these homes are not left and re-visited as remnants of a shared past; they are abandoned and often torn down, erasing their presence from the landscape. *Community Remains, Former Morrisonville Settlement, Dow Chemical Corporation,*

Plaquemine, Louisiana (1998) [figure 14] is a photograph of many displacements. A dark, grassy foreground is contrasted by an opaque, ochre sky that frames a spherical oil tank which dominates the horizon. Two rectangular earthy patches of ground sit in front of the tank and are identified as the community remains in the title. Contained within the image is a progression of events: the settling of the town, the moving in of Dow Chemical as represented by the oil tanks that lurk in the background, and the subsequent removal of the homes by the corporation. The caption explains that Morrisonville was an African-American community established since the 1870s—importantly, a freedman's town. When Dow Chemical moved into the region in the 1950s, residents began to complain about the smell and health issues resulting from the emissions of the vinyl chloride plant, and by the late 1980s, the town was bought out by Dow Chemical. Generations of families lived in historic communities like Morrisonville, and it is difficult—emotionally and financially—to pick up and leave. Dow Chemical did more than physically relocate the residents and their homes; it also displaced and built over their histories. In the case of Morrisonville, the cemetery is all that remains of their community, and families must pass through plant security in order to visit the graves of their relatives (New America Media 2015). Orff poignantly remarks, "as residents scatter throughout the region, the sociopolitical structures built into these historic communities are frayed. On a regional scale, the African and Cajun diasporas are repeated" (Misrach and Orff 2012: 61). Such fragmentation disperses communities, erases histories, and re-opens the deep psychological wounds of racism.

The final set of images in Misrach's portion of the text provide a postscript. These are the images Misrach made in 2010 when he returned to the region to see whether or not things had changed since his initial trip. The postscript opens on a somewhat hopeful note, with a photograph of a billboard in Vacherie protesting the construction of the Petroplex, a large, crude oil storage tank "farm."[11] However, the narrative takes a more ominous turn with the next hazy images of new suburban housing developments and a lone shopping cart in a dimly-lit parking lot. The last photograph in the book is *Helicopter Returning from Deepwater Horizon Spill, Venice, Louisiana* (2010) [figure 15]. In this seemingly tranquil, pastoral scene the lush, green landscape is inhabited by three healthy looking cows; the white one at center even turns to address the camera. Flying almost directly above the central animal is a tiny white helicopter, which the title reveals is on its way back from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill, in which nearly five million gallons of oil gushed from the sea floor for eighty-seven days, making it the largest marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry. As it is throughout *Petrochemical America*, the beauty of this image belies the disaster that allowed for its creation. While all appears safe and serene in the landscape, an invisible catastrophe unfolds; nothing is ever what it seems.

[11] A quick online search reveals that the protest and prior land use plans established by the parish were overturned, and construction is set to complete in 2016.

The Photobook as Activist Practice

Aside from the exhibition, the book itself has received very little critical attention and only brief mentions in art and photography publications like *Artforum* and *Photo-Eye*. The bulk of reviews have come from either popular news publications like *The Huffington Post* and *The New Yorker*, or environmental and architectural journals like *Onearth*, *The Environmental Magazine*, and the *Journal of Landscape Architecture*. The most thorough analysis of the work to date was published online in the *Southern Spaces* journal. It is no wonder *Petrochemical America* has attracted such a broad viewership, but to do justice to the text, it must be considered within a broader tradition of the Depression-era photobook. While it is useful to consider Misrach and Orff's text within an even broader history of the American photobook, the photobooks of the 1930s in particular offer a formal parallel to *Petrochemical America* specifically because they were conceived of as activist collaborations between a photographer and a writer. Reviewers have described Misrach and Orff's text as a "coffee table book" or an exhibition catalogue, which are unfortunate misnomers considering the context of its publication (Lirette 2013). *Petrochemical America* is an artist's book, thoughtfully assembled by Misrach and Orff with the photobook publisher Aperture, with whom Misrach has worked throughout his career. While this may seem like a minor misinterpretation, it is crucial to the art historical context of the book.

Part of this misreading is likely due to the fact that Misrach includes quite a bit of text in his photobook. It is not often that a contemporary photographer publishes a photobook with a scholar, and it is downright uncommon for a contemporary photobook

to include over one hundred pages of text. Nonetheless, Misrach and Orff's collaborative undertaking is not without precedent. It specifically draws upon the activist impulses of the Depression-era photobook, and most notably, the iconic photographer Dorothea Lange and economist Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939). The "photo-textual book" has been around nearly since the medium's inception; the US Government Printing Office published volumes of early landscape photography, like Timothy O'Sullivan's *Photographs showing Landscapes, Geological and Other Features, of Portions of the Western Territory of the United States* (1874-5). Photobooks of the Civil War, like Alexander Gardner's *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War* (1866), which also included photographs by O'Sullivan, were also early examples of the "photobook as record" (Parr and Badger 2004). However, the collaborative photobook as a distinctly *modern* artistic practice emerged during the Great Depression (Allred 2010). Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor were not alone, nor were they the first to publish such a book; Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) were also groundbreaking in their fusion of text and documentary image. Tellingly, all three books reckon with the failure of the Reconstructed South, another useful context in which to consider Misrach and Orff's project. Bourke-White and Caldwell aimed to probe the "southern contradiction" in which the institution of slavery had ended, but the ideals that supported the cruel institution continued to define the socioeconomic place of African Americans. Caldwell, a novelist, created a fictional narrative, which he sought to "authenticate" through Bourke-White's documentary

images (Bourke-White and Caldwell 1937). Though Caldwell's quotations and Bourke-White's images often perpetuate the racial stereotypes they purport to teardown, they get to the heart of the racial dynamics of the region during the 1930s. In chapter three, the character Magee from Mississippi explains, "Give a nigger an inch and he'll take a mile. I know them. That's why you have to keep them in their place, and the less you give them, the less they'll try to take from you" (Bourke-White and Caldwell 1937: 17). The construction of place laid out by this statement defines both a social and an economic relationship between black and white citizens in which white residents claim to have a responsibility to manage black bodies by economically disadvantaging them. These racial dynamics still resonate in the region today as major corporations like Shell Oil effectively trap historic black neighborhoods in poverty. Once the corporations move in, homes—one of the biggest financial investments a person makes—become practically worthless. Similarly, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee points out the unequal opportunities for education in Hale County, Alabama where black schoolchildren are packed into one-room shacks while white children have newly built schools paid for through tax dollars.[12]

Lange and Taylor's work most closely resembles Misrach and Orff's project in its fusion of Taylor's hard data with Lange's humanizing portraits full of visual metaphors that interact with the captions. *An American Exodus* was an activist undertaking that sought to explicitly combat the fictional narrative of Bourke-White and Caldwell. In their

[12] Jeff Alred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (New York: Oxford University Press 2012); William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford 1973).

introduction, Lange and Taylor write, "Quotations which accompany photos report what the person photographed said, not what we think might be their unspoken thoughts" (Lange and Taylor 1939: 15). At the same time, the authors, like Misrach and Orff, still manage to work in the overlapping spheres of reality and metaphor. In Lange's image, *Agricultural Ladder* (1937), [figure 16], a crumbling staircase connects the earth to a dilapidated tenant house. The caption from the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy reads, "The Committee's examination of the agricultural ladder has indicated . . . an increasing tendency for the rungs of the ladder to become bars—forcing imprisonment in a fixed social status from which it is increasingly difficult to escape" (Lange and Taylor 1939: 16). This photograph acknowledges that the agricultural system is intrinsically corrupt and alludes to the imprisonment many tenant farmers faced as they had no ability to work off their debt.

The next page, in a section called "Old South" the authors describe the transformation of cotton from a product much like oil, one that served "little more than domestic uses of households" to a commercial market with "no limits" that depended on the labor of slaves (Lange and Taylor 1939: 18). This statement is accompanied by an image of a faceless body bent over a row of cotton [figure 17] suggesting the dehumanizing impact of mass production on labor. The mass production of cotton in the South paved the way for the mass production of oil as it instituted a belief in limitlessness, faithfulness to the market, and a detachment from labor that continues to define contemporary consumption patterns in America.

Petrochemical America is part of this lineage; though, instead of portraying the construction of place through portraiture, Misrach and Orff demonstrate how the landscape itself is a major character in this national narrative. Unlike people, who die and disappear underground, the landscape endures, and as such is uniquely positioned to reveal the histories that have shaped the present moment. Like geological strata, Misrach and Orff's landscapes give contemporary readers clues to our recent history. The landscapes of *Petrochemical America* are porous places of memory, sites that harbor generations upon generations of ghosts.

Visibility and Invisibility

Just because we do not see chains, does not mean they are not there. Indeed, the ever-flooding landscape of the marshy Gulf Coast allows many things to become invisible or conveniently destroyed. In her essay, "Oil and Water" Rebecca Solnit writes about the BP oil spill of 2010 and describes the ways in which BP sought to disguise its practices and limit information that reached the public, all while perpetuating blatant master/slave dynamics in the region through the use of forced, disguised, and predominantly African American prison labor to clean up the coast. Solnit writes, "In the first few days after the blowout, cleanup workers could be seen wearing scarlet pants and white T-shirts with 'Inmate Labor' printed in large red block letters. Outrage flared among local officials and newly unemployed residents desperate for work. Those explicit outfits disappeared in a matter of days" and were replaced with BP uniforms and rubber boots (Solnit 2014, 120). This practice explicitly mirrors the alliance between law

enforcement and big business in the 1930s where prison labor was hired out to work on chain gangs for large companies for the profit of both the prison system and the employer. The reliance on such cheap labor harms the entire wage-earning economy. The difference in the contemporary incarnation is that it has now become much more difficult to discern the regular citizen from the prisoner. Nevertheless, the prison industrial complex in Louisiana proudly tethers itself to the plantation regime. Louisiana's prisons are built directly on top of old plantations, keep the name of the plantation, and have inmates perform plantation labor, farming crops that are not just used within the prison complex, but are sold at market. This parallel is not new.[13]

Disguised labor is only one phantom that haunts the region. Petrochemical companies continue to attempt to "debunk" the Cancer Alley narrative and limit the distribution of studies that were not performed under their supervision. The St. Charles marketing firm, Healthy Image, is dedicated to helping the Lake Area Industrial Alliance (LAIA) "fight the Cancer Alley myth" (Louisiana Chemical Association 2015). According to its website, the LAIA is a nonprofit that is dedicated to "monitor and respond to the public's perception of area industry, specifically in the areas of environmental performance" (Louisiana Chemical Association 2015). In 2007, the

[13] The non-profit news website, Truthout notes that at Angola prison in Louisiana, prisoners are paid four to twenty cents per hour for plantation labor, and are only allowed to keep half this wage. The other half is put up as a savings account for when prisoners are released. Maya Schenwar notes, "Besides the fact that two cents an hour may not accumulate much of a start-up fund, there is one glaring peculiarity about this arrangement: due to some of the harshest sentencing practices in the country, most Angola prisoners are never released. Ninety-seven percent will die in prison, according to [Cathy] Fontenot [who is Angola's assistant warden]" (Schenwar 2008).

nonprofit launched a television advertising campaign that used charts and "experts" to argue that cancer is no higher in Louisiana's energy corridor than in the rest of the country. This core argument conveniently places the blame on individual lifestyle choices like eating processed foods that chemicals are used to make and often are cheaper than fruit and vegetables. In a gross attempt to empathize with its audiences, the LAIA notes in a large bullet point, "It's a natural inclination for people to blame someone or something for things they can't control (and don't really understand)" (Louisiana Chemical Association 2015). These two statements curiously contradict each other, at once saying individuals can control whether or not they get cancer through their lifestyle and admitting that they cannot control—let alone understand—why cancer rates are so high.

This is not the only method for censoring the narrative. Despite the critical acclaim of *Petrochemical America*, the images have still not been shown in the region, though they have been scheduled for exhibition. The work has primarily been exhibited on the east and west coasts at university art museums and other non-profit galleries. The show was scheduled for exhibition at the end of 2014 through the beginning of 2015 in Lafayette at the Hilliard University Art Gallery at the University of Louisiana . In early October 2014, weeks before the exhibition's opening, the show was cancelled due to lack of funding (Lee Gray, e-mail message to author, October 12, 2014.). Unusually, the website does not list board members or donors of any level, nor do they have a 990 that is independent from the university's, making it difficult to identify the influential patrons of

the museum. However, the museum prides itself on being down the street from the Oil Center, which aims to "aggressively pursue the generation of a positive image and the continuing vitality of this historic area" (Oil Center 2015). The cancellation of this exhibition and the lack of visibility in the region suggests that these images are being censured, erasing, once more, the unsavory histories of the region.

Hauntings

> I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay…Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.
>
> —Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The place that is continuously rearticulated in every layer of *Petrochemical America* is the plantation. It remains, as Toni Morrison's character Sethe describes in *Beloved*, "out there, in the world...Right in the place where it happened" (Morrison 1988: 35). Place is not simply a point on a map or a crossing of latitude and longitude; it is a psychic construction, a system of beliefs and relationships with the land, with other people, and with oneself. While American slavery remains trapped in its own stratus, buried in it's own far away place and time, it lays the foundation upon which subsequent layers of history are formed—the present moment included. Misrach and Orff's invocation of the past through photographs, maps, and text is not incidental. These histories continue to actively shape the region and in turn the rest of the country as well.

Slavery does much more than haunt the landscape; it provides a lasting model for social control through the economic advantage of one demographic at the extreme disadvantage and outright abuse of a largely African American population.[14] Misrach and Orff's *Petrochemical America* is just one representation of these hauntings, but it singularly reveals the knotted and tangled nature of race, capitalism, and the environment in America.

While the plantations Misrach and Orff portray do not continue to profit off of present-day enslaved black labor, they do continue to profit at the expense of a largely black or poor population.[15] Though those bodies are not in visible chains, they are stuck, rendered economically and physically disabled primarily at the hands of the petrochemical industry, which Robert Bullard aptly calls, "the new masters" (Bullard 1990: 104). Like their ancestors, many residents are unable to leave Diamond. They do not profit from the industry, and it physically wears down their bodies—all this, right in the place where their ancestors were also trapped and rendered unable to profit from the dominant industry. Very little metaphor resides in this comparison.

[14] See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010).
[15] See Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990) and Lerner, *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor* (2005).

Figure 1: Richard Misrach, *Playground and Shell Refinery, Norco, Louisiana*, 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 2: Russell Lee, *Negro child residing in old Trepagnier house near Norco, Louisana*, October 1938, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USF34- 031686-D]

Figure 3: Russell Lee, *Row of Negro cabins near Destrehan, Louisiana*, September 1938, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USF34-031349-D]

Figure 4: Richard Misrach, *Restored Slave Cabins, Edgard, Louisiana* 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 5: John Messina, *A Mountain of Damaged Oil Drums Near the Exxon Refinery, Baton Rouge, Louisiana* 1972, National Archives, Records of the Environmental Protection Agency, [412-DA-3513]

Figure 6: Timothy O'Sullivan's *Iceberg Cañon, Nevada*, 1871, Library of Congress Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division [LC-DIG-ppmsca-10024]

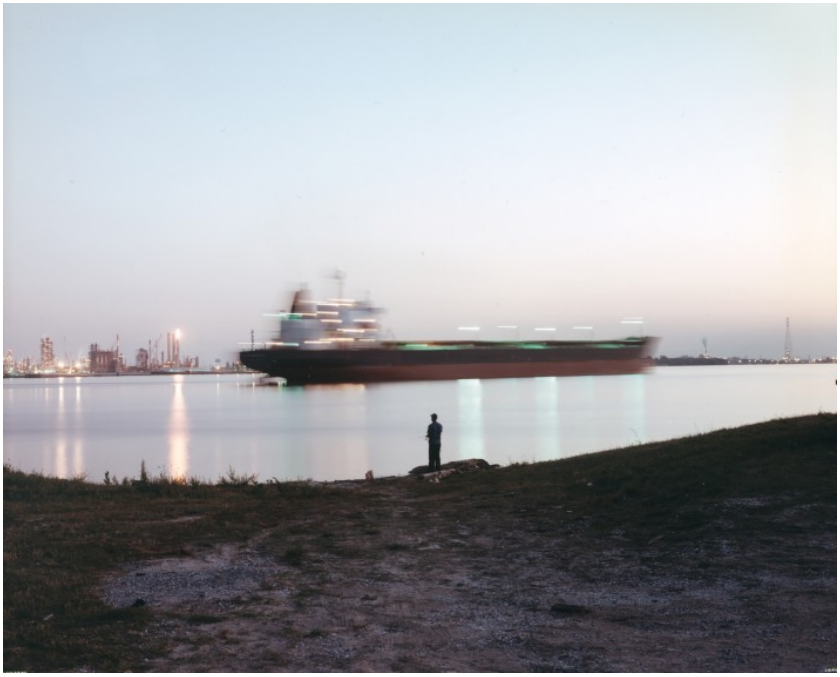

Figure 7: Richard Misrach *Night Fishing, Near Bonnet Carré Spillway, Norco, Louisiana*, 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 8: Richard Misrach, *Norco Cumulus Cloud*, 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 9: Richard Misrach, *Swamp and Pipeline, Geismar, Louisiana*, 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

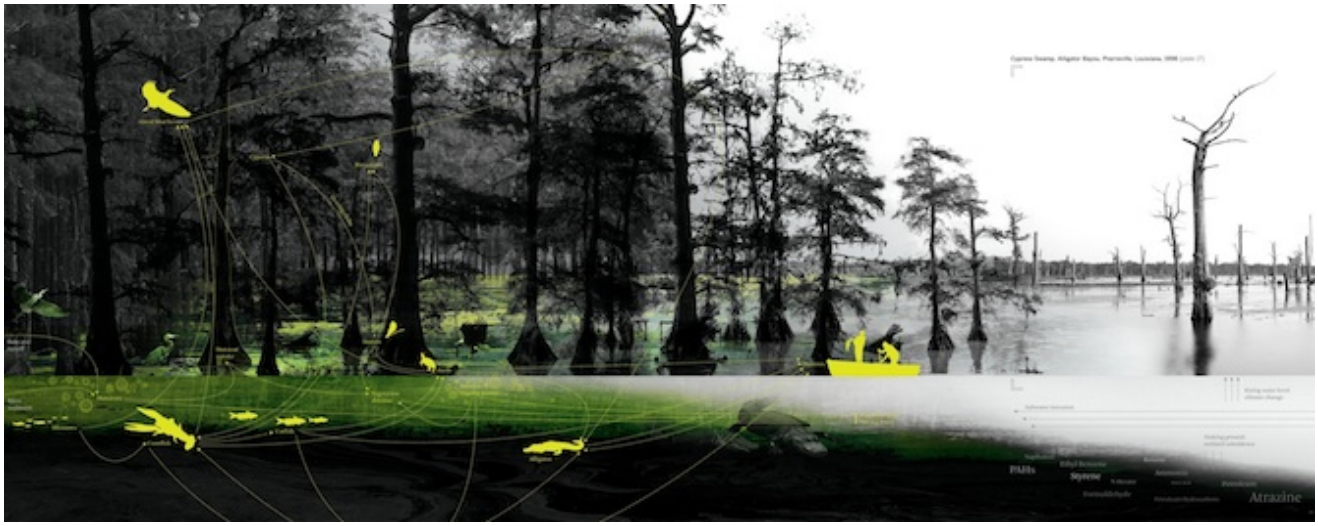

Figure 10: Kate Orff, *Requiem for a Bayou*, 2012 from the book *Petrochemical America* © Kate Orff 2012

Figure 11: Exhibition View, Aperture Gallery, 2012, Courtesy Aperture Gallery New York

Figure 12: Richard Misrach, *Tour Guide, Oak Alley Plantation, Vacherie, Louisiana*, 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 13: *Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana*, 1998 from the series *Petrochemical America* © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 14: Community Remains, Former Morrisonville Settlement, Dow Chemical Corporation, Plaquemine, Louisiana, 1998 from the series Petrochemical America © Richard Misrach 2012

Figure 15: Richard Misrach, *Helicopter Returning from Deepwater Horizon Spill, Venice, Louisiana*, 2010 from the series Petrochemical America © Richard Misrach 2012

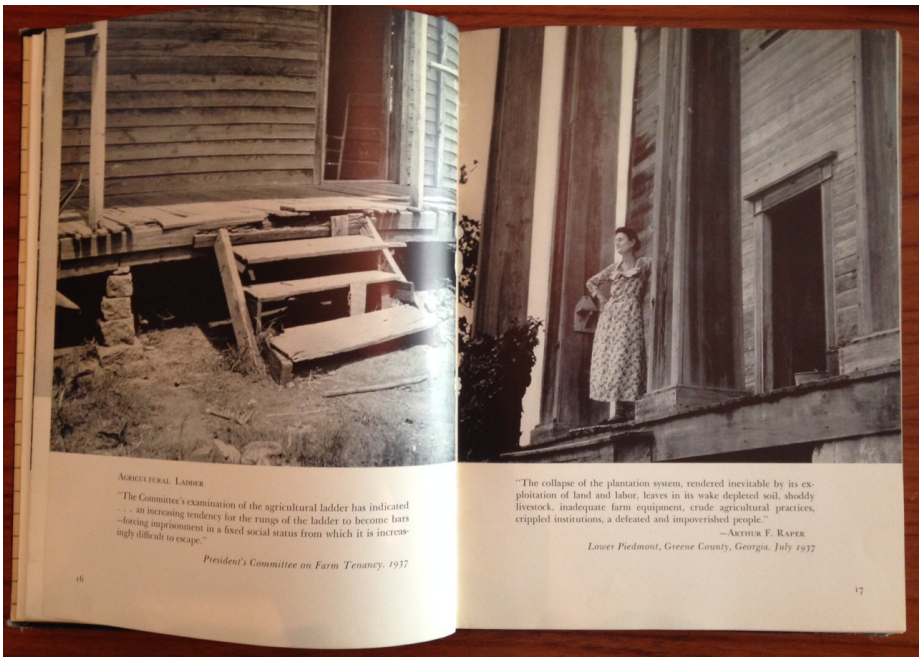

Figure 16: Dorothea Lange, *Agricultural Ladder*, from Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus* 1937, (Photo by Ashlyn Davis)

OLD SOUTH: Although we have nearly forgotten it, the spread across the South of a vigorous rural structure which now we call a problem was itself the product of a machine invented barely five generations ago. Planted by the earliest English settlements in America, cotton served little more than the domestic uses of households throughout the colonial era. Not until the slow, laborious, hand method of separating closely-adhering lint from cottonseed could be mechanized, was commercial production feasible.

In 1793 the Yankee Whitney invented the saw gin. The effect was immediate. Cotton production doubled in four years and increased eight-fold during the decade ending in 1804. There were no limits to the expanding market, for inventions in Great Britain were revolutionizing the textile industry and beginning to clothe the world in machine-made cotton cloth. In America slavery became more profitable.

In the Piedmont from Georgia to Virginia men grew more cotton.

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By 1825 planters and their slaves were beginning to settle Alabama, the Lower Mississippi, the Red River Valley in Louisiana, and western Tennessee. By 1860 the center of gravity of southern cotton production already had moved west along the Black Belt in Alabama on to the delta lands of the Mississippi, and the fringes of the Cotton Belt lay across Arkansas and eastern Texas.

As the planters advanced westward through the forests they established the basic characteristics of the Cotton Belt. They settled on the choicest lands of the South. They reared a landed aristocracy. They developed a one-crop economy and laid the southern foundations of a sectionalism which split the nation in the War between the States.

On the ruins of War the sharecropper replaced the slave. Neither planter nor laborer could readily command credit. So the propertyless freedman took his pay in a share of the crop instead of wages, and he mortgaged that share for the advances of subsistence "furnished" him by the planter while the crop matured. Thus, despite scattered protests by southern farmers in the late sixties that the sharecrop system was "a ruinous one to the interests of the country and its labor" it became riveted on the South.

Rural poverty in cotton is no longer a problem of race. After the War white workers began to engage in the production of cotton which previously they had shunned. Today after less than three generations white sharecroppers are almost equal in number to black sharecroppers, and as tenants they outnumber the colored by nearly two to one.

Nor does exhaustion of the soil distinguish the color of its victims. As in the North the pioneers were wasteful of the land. Even before the War a southern Congressman complained of Alabama "fields once fertile, now unfenced, abandoned and covered with those evil harbingers, fox-tail and broomsedge. . . . Indeed, a country in its infancy, where, fifty years ago, scarce a forest tree had been felled by the axe of the pioneer, is already exhibiting the painful signs of senility and decay apparent in Virginia and the Carolinas." Erosion, boll weevil, lost markets have forced plantation mansions into decay and left undernourished families on impoverished land.

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Figure 17: Dorothea Lange, *Untitled*, from Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus* (photo by Ashlyn Davis)

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